

Statement by
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I would like to thank the Committee for inviting me to share my knowledge of the history and contemporary situation of the Muslim peoples of China. This knowledge is based on more than twenty years of research on this highly important, but neglected topic, and more than seven years lived in China.^[i]

With a Muslim population conservatively estimated at twenty million, China today has a larger Muslim population than most Arab countries, and yet little is known about this community. Of China's 55 officially recognized minority peoples, 10 are primarily Muslim: the Hui, Uighur, Kazak, Dongxiang, Kirghiz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bonan, and Tatar. The largest group, the Hui, are spread throughout the entire country, while the other nine live primarily in the northwest. I will begin by concentrating on the Hui, and then address the situation of the Uighurs of Xinjiang.^[ii]

Shortly after the advent of Islam in the seventh century, there were Muslims in China, for sea trade networks between China and Southwest Asia had existed for centuries. Small communities of Muslim traders and merchants survived for centuries in cities along China's southeast coast. This early interest in China as a destination for Muslim travelers is reflected in the famous hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, '*Utlub al-'ilm wa law fi Sin*, "seek knowledge, even unto China."

Although Muslim communities were established in China as early as the seventh century, it was not until the thirteenth century, during the Yuan dynasty, that tens of thousands of Muslims from Central and Western Asia settled in China. Most of the Hui population today are descendants of these early settlers. Despite centuries of relative isolation from the rest of the Islamic world, the Muslims in most regions of China have managed to sustain a continuous knowledge of the Islamic sciences, Arabic, and Persian. Given extended periods of persecution combined with periods of intense government efforts to legislate adoption of Chinese cultural practices and norms,^[iii] that Islam should have survived, let alone flourished, is an extraordinary historical phenomenon. Although some scholars have attributed the survival of Muslim communities in China to their ability to adopt Chinese cultural traditions, when asked themselves, Chinese Muslims usually attribute their survival to their strong faith and God's protection.

In 1644, the Qing dynasty was established, marking the beginning of a period of unparalleled growth and expansion, both in terms of territory and population. Travel restrictions were lifted, and the Muslims of China were once again allowed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and study in the major centers of learning in the Islamic world. During this period several Hui scholars studied abroad and upon their return they started a movement to revitalize Islamic studies by translating the most important Islamic texts into Chinese and thus making them more accessible.

However, despite the opportunities for travel and study that arose during this period, the Qing dynasty also represented a period of unparalleled violence against the Muslims of China. As reform movements led by Muslims who had studied overseas spread, conflicts arose between different communities. In several instances the government intervened, supporting one group against another, leading to an exacerbation of the conflict, outbreaks of mass violence and the eventual slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Muslims, and several rebellions.

One of the most common stereotypes of the Muslims is that they are an inherently violent people. In order to show how such prejudices evolve I would like to briefly summarize the events leading up to the slaughter of

as many as 750,000 Muslims in southwest China in the 1870s. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, China experienced a massive population explosion resulting in millions of Han Chinese moving into the frontier regions. As more immigrants moved into Yunnan province along the southwest frontier, there were increasing clashes with the indigenous peoples, and the Hui who had settled there in the thirteenth century and whose population is estimated to have been one million. The Han settlers, not unlike white settlers throughout much of colonial history, did not view the local peoples as full humans, and citizens with equal rights under the law. In a series of disputes between these immigrants and the Hui, local Han Chinese officials (who themselves were not local residents), repeatedly decided to support their fellow Han Chinese against the local residents. The Muslims sent envoys to Beijing seeking justice to no avail. Fighting escalated and after a government led massacre of the Muslim population of the provincial capital Kunming, a Chinese Muslim scholar started a rebellion and in 1856 established an independent Islamic state centered in northwest Yunnan. The state survived for almost 16 years, and the Muslims worked closely together with other indigenous peoples. However, following the quelling of other major rebellions, the Chinese Emperor ordered his troops to concentrate their efforts on Yunnan; the massacres that ensued wiped out the majority of Muslims in the region. Estimates of the percentage killed range from 60 to 85%, and more than a century later, their population has still not recovered its original number. Another consequence of the rebellion was a series of government regulations severely restricting the lives of Muslims.^[iv] From a Han Chinese perspective, the insistence on the part of the Muslims to fight for their rights even against overwhelming odds, was a sign of violent tendencies, rather than a desire for justice regardless of the consequences.

During the communists rise to power in the 1940s, many Muslims agreed to support them in exchange for guarantees of religious freedom. Although in the early years of the PRC these promises were respected, during subsequent political campaigns, culminating with the Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1976), the Muslims of China found their religion outlawed, their religious leaders persecuted, imprisoned and even killed, and their mosques defiled, if not destroyed.^[v]

In the years immediately following the Cultural Revolution, the Muslims of China lost no time in rebuilding their devastated communities. Throughout China, Muslims began slowly to restore their religious institutions and revive their religious activities. Their first priority was to rebuild their damaged mosques thereby allowing communities to create a space in which they could once again pray together, but also so that the mosques could reassert their role as centers of Islamic learning. Over the next two decades mosques throughout most of the country organized classes for not only girls and boys, and young adults, but also for older men and women who had not had the opportunity to study their religion. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing to the 1990s Islamic colleges have also been established throughout most of China.

Within China, when asked how to explain the recent resurgence in Islamic education, community members cite two main reasons: a desire to rebuild that which was taken from them, and the hope that a strong religious faith would help protect Muslim communities from the myriad of social problems presently besetting China in this day and age of rapid economic development. Chinese Muslim studying overseas reiterate the need to equip themselves and their communities for their future in a state which seems to be ideologically adrift.^[vi]

After many years of living in China and interviewing religious teachers and students, I am convinced that these studies have an overwhelmingly positive influence on Chinese society. Older Muslims are finally able to study their religious traditions, and young people are able to learn the guiding moral traditions of Islam, including a respect for the state and its laws. As both of my daughters attended the public Hui preschool in Kunming for several years, I can attest to the extraordinary degree to which the teachers promoted civic responsibility and community values.

Moreover, Muslim religious leaders have been able to assist in the national government's efforts to stem the increasing number of rural households who are sacrificing their children's education, particularly their

daughters', as recent economic reforms have resulted in school fees that are crippling families incomes. Imams have worked together with the All-China Women's Federation to remind peasants in rural areas of their religious obligation within Islam to educate all their children. Women have also played a very active role in the revival of Islamic education, both as students and as teachers. The women are well aware of the importance of educating girls, for as one said to me, "educate a man, educate an individual; educate a women, educate a nation."

The Muslims' emphasis on education, both secular and religious, is not a surprise. As other minority groups who have survived the vicissitudes of state persecution over time, they have learned that the only thing that cannot be taken away from them is their education. Consequently, Muslims in China have always be overrepresented among teachers, professors and college graduates.

At present the government still maintains very strict control on all aspects of public religious practice and education throughout China. The government controls the faculty, student and curriculum of Islamic schools. It controls the appointment of imams in mosques, and decides which ones will be allowed to lead prayers at the Friday services. I will now turn to the situation of Muslims in Xinjiang.

Conditions in Xinjiang

Although Muslims throughout China face a variety of challenges and are the subject of a wide range of discriminatory actions, the situation for the indigenous peoples of Xinjiang is unprecedented in its severity, surpassing even the repressive policies facing the Tibetans. Muslims that hold official positions, including faculty at the universities are forbidden to carry out any religious activity in public. They are not allowed to attend mosque, fast during Ramadan, or in any other way respect their religious traditions in public. There are signs on mosques refusing entry to anyone under 18 years of age. Islamic education outside the one officially controlled school is forbidden.

The state has conflated the practice of Islam with separatist activity and completely overreacted in its illegally prohibiting almost all forms of Islamic education and public religious practice. Large numbers of Muslims in Xinjiang have been thrown in jail and sentenced without public trial. And an untold number have been executed for accused political crimes.

Once the overwhelming majority in Xinjiang, Uighurs and other Muslim peoples will soon be outnumbered by Han Chinese immigrants. And although the government is committed to spending millions of dollars on development projects there, the primary beneficiaries in virtually every major industrial and development project, have been the immigrant Han Chinese population, and often with tremendous negative environmental impact on the region.

Specific policy recommendations

- All Muslims should have the freedom to practice their religion, and all parents should have the freedom to bring their children with them to mosque.
- All Muslims should have the freedom to take part in Islamic studies classes, and pursue a deeper understanding of their religion.
- All schools in predominantly minority areas should be allowed to teach the cultural traditions and history of the minority people there. At present the curricula of all primary and secondary schools in China are controlled at the national level, and minority peoples are not allowed to study their own history and culture. [\[vii\]](#)
- The current quota of only 2,000 people being allowed to make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca should be increased to at least 20,000 (which is the normal amount that would be allowed using the Saudi calculation of one hajj visa for every 10,000 Muslims in a given country); and there should be no age restrictions (presently only people 60 and older are allowed to make the pilgrimage).

- The government is making it increasingly difficult for Muslims to receive a passport, thereby limiting their ability to take part in the hajj, study overseas, and take part in business activities. Religious belief should not be used as a reason for denying an individual a passport.
- Over the past decade, throughout China mosques and Muslim neighborhoods dating back centuries have been destroyed as a result of real estate and public development projects. Efforts should be made, ideally through international organizations like UNESCO, to protect Muslim neighborhoods and preserve historic mosques as national heritage sites. These communal spaces are of fundamental importance to the survival of these communities.
- Muslims in official and public roles should not be coerced into publicly renouncing their religious obligations, for example being forced to eat during daylight hours during Ramadan, the month of fasting.
- Remove ethnicity from national id cards as it leads to discrimination in employment, housing, and traveling.

Recommendations specific to Xinjiang

- The government should allow Uighurs and other indigenous peoples to freely study and learn their own languages and history.
- The decision to discontinue the use of the Uighur language at all universities in Xinjiang should be rescinded. According to numerous reports, last summer thousands of books in the Uighur language were burned by government officials in Xinjiang.
- Although Radio Free Asia broadcasts in Uighur, VOA does not.
- The US should support the establishment of local non-political NGOs by indigenous peoples to promote economic, educational and public health development projects.

Conclusion

At the present time many Muslims in China continue to hope and pray that the US government will use its influence to persuade the Chinese state to uphold its moral and international obligations to allow for the freedom of religion and the survival of indigenous cultures. Recent actions by the US, including the decision to acquiesce to Beijing's labeling a small obscure Uighur group, the ETIM (Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement) as a "terrorist organization," have done much to undermine Chinese Muslims' faith in the US as protector of basic human rights.

And although there are numerous reports made by the Chinese state, and often repeated in the Western press that radical separatism is a common desire in Xinjiang, in fact in dozens of conversations, spanning 20 years now, I have never heard a Uighur call for violent attacks on the Chinese state. They have spoken with an increasing despair that they simply be allowed to practice their religion, continue to use their language in their studies, and uphold their traditional cultural practices, as citizens of China.

I entreat our government to encourage the Chinese state to uphold the basic rights of the Muslims in China. Current repressive tactics not only undermine the Muslims rights to pass on their religious and moral values and cultural practices to their children, they also undermine the Muslims' trust in the Chinese government.

In conclusion, although maintaining their religious beliefs and practices over the centuries has been a continual challenge, Muslims in China have always been confident of their identities as both Muslims and Chinese. Although many have presumed that these identities were somehow inherently antagonistic, the survival of Islam in China for over a millennium belies these assumptions. Islamic and Chinese values have both proven to be sufficiently complementary and dynamic to allow for the flourishing of Islam in China, and God willing, it will continue to.

[i] I first studied in Beijing from 1982 - 83 while an undergraduate, and returned in 1993 to complete my doctoral dissertation on the early history of Islam in China. I subsequently worked as a consultant on HIV/AIDS prevention projects, and minority education projects.

[ii] According to the 2000 China national census, the Hui population of China is approximately 9.2 million and the Uighur population is 8.6 million. The other Muslim populations are: Kazak 1.3 million; Dongxiang 400,000; Kyrgyz 171,000; Salar 90,000; Tajik 41,000; Uzbek 14,000; Baonan 13,000; and Tatar 5,000.

[iii] During the early part of the Ming period (1368-1644) China's cosmopolitan and international initiatives gave way to a period of conservatism and the redirection of imperial resources toward domestic issues and projects. During this period numerous laws were passed requiring "foreigners" to dress like Chinese, adopt Chinese surnames, speak Chinese, and essentially in appearance, become Chinese. Despite these restrictions and requirements, the Muslims of China continued to actively practice their faith and pass it on to their descendants. By the end of the Ming dynasty there were enough Chinese Muslim intellectuals that were thoroughly educated in the classical Confucian tradition, that several scholars developed a new Islamic literary genre: religious works on Islam written in Chinese that incorporated the vocabulary of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist thought.

[iv] Muslims were no longer allowed to live within city walls, were restricted to certain occupations, and in most cases lost all their personal property, businesses, farm land, and communal property, such as schools and mosques.

[v] During this period all worship and religious education were forbidden, and even simple common utterances such as *insha'allah* (God willing), or *al-hamdulillah* (thanks be to God) could cause Muslims to be punished. Despite the danger, Muslims in many parts of China continued their religious studies in secret.

[vi] Over the past decade an increasing number of Chinese Muslims have decided to pursue their religious studies at Islamic universities overseas.

[vii] Outside of Xinjiang, Chinese Muslims are able to offer classes for preschool students, and in after school programs and summer programs for older children.